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ABSTRACT

This paper contains a summary of the impact of writing projects that are modeled after and partially funded by the Bay Area Writing Project and emphasizes the growth and development of the Greater New Orleans Writing Project (GNOWP). The assumptions behind the National Writing Project that link these projects together, the research that supports them, and a number of ideas that they have led to are reported. The summer writing institutes sponsored under the project are described, as well as the selection of the participants and the utilization of the participants' knowledge to further inservice training. In addition to GNOWP, the project sites described include Northern Virginia, Montana, Nebraska, and San Jose, California. The effects of writing institute attendance on teachers' and students' perceptions of writing and ability to write, a sample of the most recent project developments, and funding requirements to continue the projects are also presented. (AEA)

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The National Writing Project: What is It and
What's in It for Everyone?

Paper presented at the Wyoming Conference on Freshman & Sophomore English,
Laramie, Wyoming, July 9, 1979.

By now, lots of teachers have heard of the Bay Area Writing Project and probably tend to think, as I did, "Oh that's something that Berkeley does" or "Well, it probably works in San Francisco" or "Here comes another fad in the teaching of writing." I first heard of BAWP, as we fondly call it, from an NEH news release that proudly announced the awarding of a grant in excess of some \$600,000 or so, money that the Bay Area Writing Project was in turn to use to fund baby BAWP's all over the country. The assumptions and goals behind the project sounded solid, the money irresistible, the Berkeley aura both attractive and intimidating. To someone teaching in Louisiana, the state that ranks 50th in literacy, Berkeley seems Nirvana, but nonetheless, I dared to write off for the guidelines and a fuller description of the project. One year later the Greater New Orleans Writing Project, GNOWP son of BAWP, was born, and all of a sudden I was involved in something called the National Writing Project, a synergistic creation that links together all of the writing project sites that are modeled after and partially funded by BAWP. What worked in San Francisco has now worked in New Orleans (and I regard Louisiana as the acid test). And in Anchorage and Boulder and Missoula and Phoenix and Memphis and Tampa and Albany. In rural areas too: the upper peninsula of Michigan, the hill country of Texas, the prairies of North Dakota

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and Minnesota. The National Writing Project is growing like some mutant from outer space as each project site in turn breeds new writing projects. When something gets that big, it gets awesome, and so I am here today to demystify the National Writing Project: to explain exactly what worked and to show how anyone--teacher, department, or institution--can use some of the results as ammunition in the on-going battle to improve the teaching of writing and the writing of students. I will describe the assumptions behind the the National Writing Project (for after all these are what worked), the research that supports them, and a number of ideas that they have led to. It's a lot of information--something for everyone.

The first assumption is that the writing problem is shared by the Universities and the schools and therefore can best be addressed by cooperatively planned and cooperatively funded university and school efforts. For far too long, university teachers have blamed the secondary teachers who have blamed the primary teachers. Everyone, of course, has blamed the students, their parents, the socio-economic conditions, and the general moral decay of the nation. Not to mention TV. English departments can claim their share of finger-pointing, although only recently have they begun to be concerned seriously with doing something about it, and they are showing their concern by way of new degree programs. Degrees in rhetoric, in the teaching of writing, in teaching in the two-year college are now supplementing the traditional programs in linguistics and in literature. And as composition programs grow, more and more universities are adopting writing workshops for their faculties, to train the TA's and to retool the senior staff. The National Writing Project simply takes this concern one step further--into the K-12 classroom.

The Greater New Orleans Writing Project illustrates the kind of cooperation

between schools and universities necessary to improve writing from kindergarten up. Initiated by the English Department of UNO, planned with the Language Arts supervisors in the metropolitan area, and implemented through the cooperation of the University and the neighboring school boards, the Greater New Orleans Writing Project attracts first grade teachers on through high school, from private and public schools, and from science, social studies, and foreign languages as well as from English. For the first time, teachers have an opportunity to talk to other teachers from other grades, districts, disciplines. War stories quickly give way to tales of success, and the simple recognition that other teachers are trying to improve their students' writing and are succeeding has kept some excellent people in the profession and has renewed the interest of others. Being a part of the Greater New Orleans Writing Project brings recognition, and recognition is important, for a system that has no merit increases must have a way to boost morale. Goodness knows, the system needs all the help it can get.

A second assumption, and one that I hope will soon start to ring false, is that most teachers have not been adequately prepared as teachers of writing. While certification requirements will vary from one state to another, few teachers who graduate more than two years ago took courses in writing, and those who took English methods courses found them geared far more to the teaching of literature than to the teaching of writing. Some of that has changed thanks to the cry "back to basics," which rings, often misguidedly, in the halls of state legislatures. However, for most prospective teachers, as is the case in Louisiana, the recent developments at the state level that were intended to improve the teaching of writing have simply meant a mandated course in advanced grammar. Legislators, like English teachers, often believe

that if something didn't work the first time, "You just need more of it."

To counter the fact that most teachers lack a background in the teaching of writing, each of the sites involved in the National Writing Project holds a summer writing institute, a total immersion in the teaching of writing. While the length of the institutes varies from one place to another--from two to eight weeks--depending on what best fits the need, all have certain characteristics in common: all involve teachers in writing and the teaching of writing. And here is where the other assumptions enter in:

1. That successful teachers of writing can be identified; the best practices of successful teachers can be effectively demonstrated to others.
2. That the best teacher of teachers is usually another teacher who has had success in a similar situation.
3. That much is known about the teaching of writing, although most teachers are unaware of that knowledge.
4. And that teachers of writing must themselves write.

These final assumptions drive the institutes. The teachers who participate in the summer institutes are the best that can be found. They are successful teachers of writing and are identified as such in various ways. Some of the project directors choose among nominees of the school districts, some tap their writing fellows based on information from the teacher grapevine, some choose among applicants. Some directors only consider as many people as there are spaces in the institute (usually 25); others screen, then select; and still others screen, narrow down further, and then make the decisions. As varied as the procedures are, ranging from interviews and writing samples to letters of support from students, the goal remains the same: to select people who are excellent teachers of writing. The best, no matter what the field or the

grade. Each teacher chosen for the institute becomes a University Writing Fellow (the capital F is important), and that's where the boost to morale enters in. In addition to a stipend, at the institute's end each GNOWP fellow receives a certificate signed by every important university official we can think of. The stipends, the certificates, the letters that go to principals and school officials all emphasize the special status of the institute fellows. By the end of the institute, they are experts in the teaching writing.

During the institute, the 25 or so fellows who have been selected provide the major resources for the next five weeks, the average length of time for most institutes. Each of the fellows will demonstrate at least one, perhaps two, teaching techniques that have been successful. Each presentation may run from one and a half to three hours and involves some writing on the part of the other fellows. Far from being lectures, the presentations are the best kind of show and tell--a thorough overview of the research and theory, followed by explanation and practice--all from the perspective of someone who is on the battleline. Teachers teaching teachers possess an authenticity and realistic viewpoint only rarely attained by university professors. I think of myself as a teacher not as a professor, but even so I am not a rose by another name. I teach at most two courses, a total of 50 or so students meeting three times a week for a total of six hours; my school counterpart teaches five courses, with sometimes as many preparations, a total of at least 150 students meeting five times a week for a total of twenty-five hours. While I also serve on department and university committees and carry out research, that is hardly comparable to lunch duty, bus duty, and various extra-curricular activities, to say nothing of potty duty. A teaching technique that works well for me may well be a

disaster in the schools, but if it worked with one inner-city eleventh grade class, it will probably work with another. Teachers distrust professors and believe teachers and with good reason.

As simple as this idea is--teachers teaching teachers--it is a radical one when viewed through the eyes of an English department chairman ("Well, that sort of thing is all right in an education course, but this is English") to say nothing of graduate deans ("What do you mean, the teachers teach?"). Here is where the BAWP aura can be helpful; after all, if it's good enough for Berkeley, it's good enough for us. And the presentations live up to their billing. For instance, the guidelines set out by the Northern Virginia Writing Project call for a written summary of the school situation student population, and level; the theory or general principles underlying the presentation, including why the theory ought to work; the problems the theory is addressing; the assumptions and attitudes of the presenter; and a short annotated bibliography. In addition, presenters are encouraged to include a combination of lecture, discussion, A-V demonstration, handouts, and "doing" by the audience; to provide samples of actual student writing in order to prompt concrete responses and questions from the audience; and to comment on evaluations, ways the ideas presented fit with other approaches, and ways the materials can be adapted to other situations.¹

The idea of teachers teaching teachers has been one of the most useful developments to come out of the National Writing Project. And when that idea is combined with the quality of the fellows and the comprehensiveness and usefulness of the presentations, the results are positive. At the Inland Area Writing Project (Riverside, Cal.), teachers rated the institute consistently higher than ratings given by a matched sample enrolled in a structured

lecture/seminar program.² Back in New Orleans, the writing fellows were asked to rate the institute's usefulness in comparison to other graduate courses they had taken. Out of a possible high of 105, the institute received a 104.5. I'm still looking for the teacher who ruined the perfect score.

Out of a group of 25 teachers, the presentations will cover a lot of ground, both in the theory and the practice of teaching writing. Frequently a teacher will know what works, but not why (the theory) nor how (the recent research). The presentations allow the teacher to develop the answers to the why's and how's in a way that pertains directly to the technique under discussion. Still, some gaps will appear and this is where the consultants come in. Ranging from the resident consultants who are the director and assistant director, to the close at hand, for example some from last year's group, to the big guns of composition, these people fill in the holes, providing, say, a summary of recent research in composing or an overview of ways to evaluate writing or a quick history of different theories of invention. Again, the emphasis is on the practical, on the classroom. Again, everyone participates, which is to say that everyone writes.

Perhaps the single most strongly held belief of the National Writing Project is that teachers of writing must themselves write. When I first heard this notion I thought, "Well, of course." But then I started to think again and, feeling a bit uncomfortable, started to make a list of what I wrote: articles, papers, memos, reports, tests, comments, minutes, exercises, responses to exercises. I stopped to examine the list and was struck by its dullness. Pushing myself, I added journal, the world's cheapest psychiatrist. Still the list looked grim. Defensively, I kept digging: letters--to friends, to companies, to associates--lists--things to buy, to do, to

remember--directions, messages. Enough. As poor and uninspired as my writing list was, many other teachers lists are poorer. At best my list could be divided into two categories, occupational and survival writing. Both boiled down to one function: utilitarian. Gone was writing for pleasure, gone was writing for discovery, gone was writing in the humanistic sense--real writing. It is this real writing that the institute fosters. While the amount of writing varies from one site to another, in all cases it is a lot. The kind of writing differs too--from formal to informal, journal to essay, self-expressive to persuasive--but in all cases, variety is more the rule than the exception. During the five weeks of the Montana Writing Project's summer institute, the fellows and directors produced 442 pages of material, ranging from a personal essay to a critique to a "real" piece headed for a magazine or journal to a paper on the presentation.³

The purpose of all this writing is fourfold: 1. to reexperience the process of writing; 2. to improve writing; 3. to encourage writing; 4. and to introduce the idea of working on writing in groups--peer editing. Somehow, all this seems to work. Not only are teachers heartened and interested enough to write for publications, they are publishing. Out of the Montana Writing Project, seven articles have been printed or accepted in US and Canadian journals and magazines; out of the Oregon Writing Project, five institute fellows were finalists in the state "Teachers as Writers" contest, and a sixth was the winner of a prose prize.⁴ This sort of increased interest in writing for publication rubs off naturally on students, and in order to provide an outlet for good student writing, the Nebraska Writing Project is currently compiling a directory for English teachers that lists the names, addresses, and editorial guidelines of newspapers, journals, and magazines that are

interested in publishing student work.⁵ To help students along toward publication, the South Bay Writing Project (San Jose) sponsored a Young Writers Conference for some 300 fifth through twelfth grade students. The students chose between two workshops that covered topics such as "Handling Dialogue," "Writing a Short Story," and "How to Write an Article." Like the institutes, the conference stressed the students' own writing and their sharing of their writing.

Publication is one of the ways in which the institute fellows and their students reach a wider audience, but if the National Writing Project stopped with what went on in the institutes and conferences, it would probably fail. This is where the in-service programs enter. By the end of the institute each of the fellows is an expert in one area of the teaching of writing and has a peer-tested demonstration to go along with the expertise. Not that the technique discussed in the presentation is teacher proof, but it has been tested by teachers. At this point the project director usually prepares a pamphlet that describes each of the presentations, listing the grade level, student population, and aims involved. The brochure is then sent to the various school districts, and the fellows become Teacher-Consultants, available for 3 hour workshops. In New Orleans, the in-service workshops take on different shapes and sizes that involve both university and schools. For instance, the University offers a three credit-hour graduate English course on the teaching of writing using 7-10 Teacher-Consultants to give demonstrations and a one credit-hour graduate English course that is a series of 4 to 5 workshops on a specific topic such as evaluation, motivation, invention and so on--two or three Teacher-Consultants. In addition to what the University offers, the local NCTE affiliate sponsors a conference of five concurrent workshops--five Teacher-Consultants. Then the school systems themselves

get into the act with a fair number of in-service day presentations that are sponsored by the school boards and mandated by the state and with several Title I funded demonstrations held as part of Orleans Parish's Secondary Curriculum Improvement Program. In each case, having 25 or more presentations come out of each summer's institute allows us to tailor the demonstration to meet the needs of the teachers. The flexibility of subject matter and variety of format broadens the impact of the fellows; thus each writing project affects the teaching of writing directly--through the institute--and indirectly--through the in-service program. All of this improved teaching ultimately affects the writing of students. The premise is simple: if we improve the writing of teachers and the teaching of writing, we will improve the writing of students.

It seems to work. One study done in Oregon compared the writing of two groups of students: those whose teachers had attended a summer institute and those whose teachers had not. Four samples were collected from each group and rated holistically for primary traits. The institute students in intermediate grades outranked the control students in "number of editing attempts, increase in number of paragraphs, increase in handwriting legibility." The growth in writing was the same, a fact that might be discouraging if the control group had not had four more weeks of instruction than institute groups.⁶ The in-service programs also have an effect. In Denver one group of teachers attended in-service workshops conducted by Colorado Writing Project Teacher-Consultants while the teachers of another junior high did not. Writing samples from students in both schools were compared, September vs. May, and examined for the rate of growth between the two groups. Samples from the in-service school were significantly higher at the .001 level.⁷

Where this degree of improvement in writing exists, other changes also

occur, changes in perceptions, preferences, and processes of writing. A follow-up study of the participants in New Jersey Writing Project vs. a control group examined attitudes toward writing as well as the writing itself. The study, conducted by Janet Emig and Joyce Carroll, found significant changes in both teachers' and students' perception of writing. While students of the institute teachers scored higher on questions such as "I reread what I've written," "I voluntarily revise what I've written," and "I like what I write," the most impressive result is that they prefer writing to watching TV.⁸

Anything as large as the National Writing Project that gets so many people excited about writing is bound to have some unanticipated spin offs, new ideas that caught fire as sparks flew from project to project. Here's a sampling:

The Prairie Writing Project holds a one week mini-institute for college faculty.

The Virginia Writing Project has produced a twelve-program color TV series on the most successful teaching of writing, presentations of the best of the best.

The Bay Area Writing Project has started to publish some of the materials that grew out of their program.⁹

The Memphis Writing Project holds a "Wordsmith Tournament," complete with the forty word dash and the 400 word freestyle.¹⁰

The Oregon Writing Project is preparing for a five week session on curriculum development.¹¹

The Tampa Bay Writing Project is campaigning to reduce class size to the NCTE recommended levels.¹²

The Greater New Orleans Writing Project has a new position in the schools--a full time writing resource person responsible for faculty development.

All of the projects require money, of course, and here is where the National Writing Project really helps, for it is indeed a network. "Who got what grant how" is just the beginning, for after that, the next question is, "What sort of evaluation procedure are they using?" Answers to those questions as well as those not yet formulated come through the National Writing Project's Network News, a newsletter published four times a year. Courtesy of the National Writing Project, BAWP, the mother of us all, is collecting a vast amount of information that can be used to push for faculty development, in-service programs, writing assessment, reasonable class size, writing across the curriculum, process vs. product, writing as discovery, prewriting, peer editing, and on and on and on. All notable studies that come out of the National Writing Project will soon be available through ERIC.

As of this May, the National Writing Project consisted of 65 sites in some 24 states, with more to come as the result of 63 requests for the 1979-1980 BAWP guidelines. Out of those 63 mailings BAWP will regrant NEH funds to some 15 or more projects. But NEH is not the only source of funds. In California, the Bay Area model has been declared exemplary, which means that local school districts can easily get up to \$10,000 for a project patterned after BAWP. Once HEW gives its imprimature and it declares the project exemplary, all states should have relatively easy access to \$10,000 per program under Title IVc. With any luck, the momentum will build in other states as it has in California and even state legislatures will see the light. California, home of the tight-fisted Proposition 13, last year

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dedicated \$140,000 in support of the California Writing Project. May we all
be so fortunate.

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Director, GNOWP

NOTES

¹ Northern Virginia Writing Project Outline for English 595/Ed 595

Participant Presentations.

² NWP Network News. I (December, 1978), p. 3.

³ NWP Network News. I (May, 1979), p. 3.

⁴ NWP Network News. I (May, 1979), p. 2.

⁵ NWP Network News. I (March, 1978), p. 6.

⁶ NWP Network News. I (May, 1979), p. 2.

⁷ NWP Network News. I (December, 1978), p. 5.

⁸ Emig, Janet and Joyce Carroll "Evaluation and Development of Student Writing." NCTE, Kansas City, November 24, 1979.

⁹ The latest is Jack Hailey's Teaching Writing K-8. Berkeley: Instructional Labs, UC Berkeley (available from Instructional Labs, Dept. of Ed., UCB, CA 94720).

¹⁰ According to the writer up in NWP Network News, "The Qualifying Events included the Forty Word Dash, a ten minute effort with a maximum word limit of 48 words in which a three-dimensional inanimate object is presented and the writer tries to describe the object as vividly and forcefully as possible. The Eighty Word Dash calls for the writer to put into words what a photographer attempted to capture in a picture. The One Hundred and Twenty Word Dash requires a letter which responds to an event described in newspaper clippings. The Final Event was a Four Hundred Word Freestyle writing. Poetry, literary

magazine, prose piece, and journalism events filled out the program." To find out more, write Ramsey Fowler, Department of English, Memphis State University.

¹¹ According to the description in NWP Network News, "Twenty-five teachers will met for five weeks, and although they will use editing groups, their concentration will be on preparing in-service presentations. For each presentation they will prepare packets containing statements of the goals and objectives for the presentation, the target-grade level(s), an outline of the presentations, examples of the hand-outs to be used, bibliographies, ditto masters of recommended lessons, and notice of alternate presentations designed for classes involving students with a second language or learning disabilities." For more information, write to Patty Stone, Crater High School Central Point, Oregon, about this plan.